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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 002217

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STATE FOR OES, OES/PCI STEWART, OES/ETC CONDO and STAS
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DOI FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
DOJ FOR JOHN WEBB
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BANGKOK FOR REO OSIUS
TASHKENT FOR REO WATTS

E.O. 12598: N/A

TAGS: [SENV](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [EAGR](#) [PTER](#) [EAID](#) [TBIO](#) [XD](#) [NP](#)
SUBJECT: NEPAL'S MAOIST INSURGENCY UNDERMINES
CONSERVATION EFFORTS

REF: KATHMANDU 2152 (AND PREVIOUS)

1. SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION: While the people of Nepal have borne the brunt of the brutal seven-year Maoist insurgency, which has claimed more than 7000 lives, the impact on Nepal's environment, natural resources and conservation efforts also has been severe. Maoist attacks on forest and park personnel, as well as on army posts in protected areas, illegal logging, and poaching of endangered wildlife are all on the rise. Security forces are abandoning remote locations, leaving many of Nepal's protected areas to the mercy of the insurgents and environmental criminals. More rhinos are being killed in national parks for their horns. Nepal's Royal Bengal Tiger population is being hunted for its skin and bones. Illegal traffic in endangered species' products has reached alarming proportions: wildlife watchers report that banned items are being sold freely in Kathmandu. The severe decline in tourism has all but eliminated the livelihoods of many of Nepal's most marginal groups and dried up financial resources used for conservation. Deforestation is accelerating, and globally significant biodiversity resources are facing extinction. Economic pressures stemming from the insurgency are increasing as the conflict drags on, threatening serious ecological damage and Nepal's future food security. This cable examines the impact on Nepal's protected areas, wildlife, and tourism industry. Septel reports how the insurgency affects forests, biodiversity resources, and rural livelihoods. End summary.

NATIONAL PARKS/PROTECTED AREAS

2. Seventeen percent of Nepal's landmass has been designated as national parks or protected areas. When conservation areas are included, more than twenty percent of Nepal is under some form of protection, one of the highest ratios in the world. These areas constitute Nepal's natural crown jewels and its chief assets for the critical tourism industry. However, vulnerability to Maoist attack has left most of these areas virtually abandoned by both security forces and park rangers. Official reports state that out of 112 guard posts in protected areas only 34 remain -- a 70 percent reduction.

3. Nepal's conservation areas, which constitute a truly exemplary effort by Nepal to protect resources of global significance, have now become security problems. As the army exits these large, rugged areas, the Maoists have turned them into launching pads for attacks. Conservation scientists lament that because of security risks, they have been unable to conduct inventories, health surveys and other studies within the protected areas. Lack of information on the status of flora and fauna is greatly hampering efforts for their conservation.

4. The insurgents also have attacked community-based conservation committee members in the Annapurna Conservation Area (close to the Maoist heartland). Even Langtang National Park, due north of the Kathmandu valley, which had been relatively untouched by the insurgency, has lately become volatile. Within the past few weeks, about a dozen soldiers sent to protect this park have been killed or seriously wounded in ambushes. Other national parks closer to the epicenter of the Maoist insurgency are largely unpatrolled. Numerous hotels and lodges within parks and in buffer zones have closed, eliminating the livelihoods of people living adjacent to the parks.

15. Nepal is a premier world destination for eco-tourism. This industry had been under pressure since the royal palace murders in June 2001, and especially since the events of September 11. Maoist tactics have been responsible for an even greater falloff. Numbers of trekkers have plummeted as cases of Maoist muggings of tourists have surfaced. Those who do come face previously unknown hardships. For example, Maoists have turned pressure cookers into a deadly weapon, packing them with explosives and timers for use as land mines and time bombs. The army banned transport of pressure cookers into outlying districts and remote areas. Since at altitudes over 10,000 feet it is difficult to cook without pressure cookers, some tourists and trekking staff report having to eat half-cooked food.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES FOR CONSERVATION DRYING UP

16. As a result, tourist entries and the revenues collected from tourists have plummeted, drying up the most important source of funds for conservation work. Records at some of the park entry points show a 40-60 percent decline. Fees charged to trekkers to enter restricted areas are no longer going towards conservation measures, but are being diverted to Nepal's cash-strapped general treasury to support anti-insurgency operations. Conservation organizations such as WWF have not been able to take up the slack, as declines in global stock markets have forced private foundations and other donors to reduce contributions.

WILDLIFE UNDER SIEGE

17. As security forces have vacated the forests, poachers have started to take maximum advantage. In Dolpo, a mid-western district bordering Tibet, Maoists staged a daring attack last year, killing more than 20 policemen. Poaching of rare and endangered animals such as musk deer and snow leopard is now reportedly rampant. Park officials say the number of snares and traps set by poachers has skyrocketed.

18. Royal Chitwan National Park, a heavily visited World Heritage Site and one of the most closely protected areas, is under growing threat. Only time will tell the fate of the Royal Bengal Tiger and the great one-horned rhinoceros that find refuge in this park. Chitwan Park officials report that, within the past year, 38 great one-horned rhinoceros have been killed by poachers for their horns, which are valued chiefly as an ingredient in traditional Chinese aphrodisiacs. On the other hand, no one knows exactly what is happening to the tiger population, since it is relatively easy to dispose of an entire tiger carcass, and enforcement personnel rarely venture deep into the woods anymore.

FLUORISHING MARKETS IN ENDANGERED SPECIES

19. Even before the insurgency, Nepal had the dubious reputation of being a conduit for illegal trafficking in wildlife products, such as shatoosh (a fine wool made from the throat hairs of the endangered Tibetan antelope, or chiru) brought from Tibet to Nepal and then to India. Similarly, tiger bone and skins from India transit Nepal on the way to Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia. Wildlife watchers believe that the level of trafficking has now reached alarming proportions and that banned items are freely sold in the markets of Kathmandu.

110. COMMENT: It is difficult even to assess how much damage has been done to Nepal's conservation efforts directly and indirectly as the result of the armed conflict. However, the longer the insecurity continues, the greater the economic pressures on Nepal's rural poor -- and the greater the eventual environmental toll will be.